DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 065 788 CG 007 104

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TITLE What Do We Know About Parents-As-Teachers?
PUB DATE 4 Apr 72
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, Illinois, April 3-7, 1972

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; Family Influence; Family Relationship; Family Role; *Intellectual Development; Mother Attitudes; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Participation; *Parent Role; *Parents

ABSTRACT

This paper is a general discussion of parents-as-teachers. This topic is approached from the standpoint of natural observation studies and laboratory studies. The natural field observations have been made in homes and in other settings, in which the main analytic technique was correlation. Numerous investigators have examined relationships between classes of parent behavior or even specific parent behaviors and classes of child behavior and sometimes even specific items of child behavior. The second approach of experimentation and quasi experimental studies have used laboratory and field situations to test, under somewhat standard conditions, what parents actually do when they behave as "teachers." Usually the latter term is narrowly defined as giving didactic instruction. The author concludes this report with the presentation of four answers to the question, "What do we know about parents as teachers?" The primary answer was that it is evident that what parents do in the early years in their various roles does influence child intellectual performance. (Author/BW)

CG 007 104

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What Do We Know About Parents-As-Teachers?[1]

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The concept of parents-as-teachers has an ancient and honorable tradition. If I can be prescientific for a moment, in Leviticus, the ancient Hebrews were enjoined to take the principles of their beliefs and told, "Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, speaking of them when thy sittest in thy house, when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down and when thou risest up." In a ceremony begun back then and recently reenacted this past week, the father of the household is told how to handle individual differences in children's understanding, and he is instructed how to answer the wise or stubborn or simple child, or how to instruct the one who is not even able to ask a question.

In spite of this, in modern times professional educators have developed and preached that parents are unable to be effective teachers of their children. As we have professionalized and bureaucratized education, and, of course, as subject matter has become far too complex to be handled in simple fashion at home, the parent has been told that he not only has little role as a teacher, but that his efforts may even be destructive. Who among us has not heard first-grade teachers and their supervisors tell parents that they should not teach their children to read before they come to school?

CG 007 104

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[1]Presented at the American Educational Research Association Convention, April 4, 1972.

We also have, however, a tradition that the school is to do missionary work with parents. Indeed, in 1891 a meeting of educators was told that they must labor earnestly in the home as well as in the kindergarten using regular and systematic home visiting by persons especially prepared for the work. The recent history of parent education, especially in the last ten years under the impetus of the poverty programs, has been based upon global assumptions, often untested, of what parents know and can do. These were: (1) that, at least in early childhood, what parents did influenced the development of children, (2) poverty parents lacked knowledge or skills in teaching, and (3) one could intervene in the home to change parents' behavior to ways that would improve the development and achievement of children. To some degree it was missionary work now couched in a more professional scientific framework.

As a result of these intervention studies and a variety of other research, we are now at the point where we can be more explicit about these assumptions. The issue of parents as teachers has been approached in two ways: first, by an examination of the natural field observations which have been made in homes and in other settings, in which the main analytic technique was correlation. Numerous investigators have examined relationships between classes of parent behavior or even specific parent behaviors and classes of child behavior and sometimes even specific items of child behavior. Although these are correlational studies, they are often cast in antecedent consequent-form, that is, data on parent behavior at one point in time are correlated with data on child performance at a later point in time.

The second approach is through experimentation and quasi experimental studies. Investigators have used laboratory and field situations

to test, under somewhat standard conditions, what parents actually do when they behave as "teachers." Usually the latter term is narrowly defined as giving didactic instruction.

Natural Observation Studies

In order to deal with the natural observation materials, teaching needs to be defined as far more than didactic instruction. If we are willing to define teaching as setting the stage for learning, as modeling, as managing the environment, as giving information, as well as engaging in direct interaction, then there is a good deal of information about the relationship between parents as teachers and their effect on children as learners.

Gordon's (1970) review listed nine cognitive and ten emotional factors which had been reported as related to child performance. These are: (1) academic guidance, (2) cognitive operational level and style, (3) cultural activities planned, (4) direct instruction of child, (5) educational aspirations, (6) use of external resources (nurs., kindergarten), (7) intellectuality of home (books, etc.), (8) verbal facility, (9) verbal frequency (e.g., dinner conversation), (10) consistency of management, (11) differentiation of self, (12) disciplinary pattern, (13) emotional security, self-esteem, (14) impulsivity, (15) belief in internal control (16) protectiveness, babying of child, (17) trusting attitude, (18) willingness to devote time to child, and (19) work habits.

Hess' (1971) most recent review suggests nine categories of parent behavior which influence child development. They are: (1) independence training, (2) warmth and high emotional involvement, (3) consistency of discipline, (4) explanatory control, (5) expectations for success,

(6) parents' sense of control, (7) the verbalness in the home, (8) parents' direct teaching, and (9) parental self-esteem. If one uses a Presage-Process-Product Approach, some of the above are presage variables, that is, they exist in the parents or the home. Some are process variables, that is, they are transactional between parents and child. They all relate to child attitude and child performance (product).

Miller (1971), in reviewing the research on the relationships between family variables and scholastic performance in the English schools, lists the following as positively related to school performance: homes where independent thinking and freedom of discussion occur, where there are values conducive to intellectual effort, where children's curiosity and academic aspirations are supported, and in which there is harmony between home and school values. Keeves (1970), in an extensive multivariate study of children in the Australian capitol territory, used Wolf's (1964) process dimensions and an interview technique to uncover relationships between school performance of early adolescents and home environment. He reported that "the importance of the mother's attitudes and ambitions stands out quite clearly, but are exceeded in importance by the provision made in the home for stimulation to learn and to promote intellectual development" (Keeves, 1970, p. 29). In a study in Utrecht, Holland, Rupp indicated the "cultural-pedagogical aspects of upbringing" and found that when high achievers were compared with low achievers within the lowest socio-economic class, the high achievers came from homes in which parents held this cultural-pedagogical point of view. They saw themselves as educators. They practiced this by "reading to the child, playing table games and word games with him, provision of educational

toys and books, read and possess books themselves, tell their children informative things of their own accord, teach their children preschool skills, go to places of interest" (Rupp, 1969, p. 176).

The Wachs, Uzgiris, and Hunt study of infants in Illinois (1971), the White and Watts Harvard Preschool Project (1971, 1972), the longitudinal work of Escalona (1972), all tend to support the concept that what parents do in the early years in behaving as broadly defined teachers of their children influences the development of the child. To illustrate from just one of these, the Illinois study, for example, found several items which consistently related to child cognitive performance in the first two years of life. These were: "There is at least one magazine placed where the child could play with it or look at it; the child was given regular training in one or more skills; the mother spontaneously vocalizes to the child; the mother spontaneously names at least one object to the child while the observer is in the home; the father helped take care of the child; the father played with the child at least ten minutes a day; the child is regularly spoken to by parents during mealtimes" (Wachs, Uzgiris, and Hunt, 1971, pp. 205-304).

Laboratory Studies

When we turn to experimental and quasi-experimental studies in which parents are placed into "teaching" situations, this audience is familiar with the landmark work of Hess and Shipman which indicated social class differences in teaching style within race. Streissguth and Bee (1972) not only reviewed this social class literature, but found that in their own work when four year olds were given a set of blocks to build a house resembling a model and the mother was instructed to give as much or as

little help as she chose, middle class mothers offered more suggestions in the form of questions, offered more specific suggestions, and engaged in more nonverbal intrusions, such as placing a block themselves. There were also significant differences in the children's performance on a set of cognitive and motivational tasks in favor of middle class children. They suggested caution in interpreting these as a causal relationship, and this caution should be carefully observed.

There are a number of studies which use social class as the major independent variable, but my concern is that more may be overlooked by so doing, because, as the Rupp, Miller, Keeves, Illinois and Harvard and our own Florida work indicated, there obviously is tremendous variability within social class groups. If we are interested in identifying particular parental attributes which we feel are desirable, then social class is not a usable label. In our studies at the University of Florida, which have been fairly well confined to poverty or near poverty level populations, in our infant, preschool, Head Start and Follow Through work, we have been examining the correlational patterns between parental presage and process variables and child performance. Our infant research (Gordon, 1969, Bradshaw, 1969, Jester and Bailey, 1969, Resnick, 1972) all clearly indicate that the amount of conversation in the home, particularly the amount directed toward the child, relates significantly to child performance. Central to the Florida studies was the idea that parents' self-esteem was an important variable in child performance. Two dissertations (Herman, 1970, Etheridge, 1971) explored the relationships between mothers' self-esteem, sense of internal control, positive attitudes towards the project, and child performance on Bayley's scales at age two. In addition to using just mental scores, Schaefer's (1969) task-oriented behavior factor, a

cluster of items on the child's behavior during testing, was also part of the measure. In both studies, sex differences were significant. The impact of mother's attitudes was more critical for boys than for girls, but overall, the way in which the mother saw herself and felt about her own control and felt toward the project were positively related to child performance. In Etheridge's study, marital status alone was not significant but entered into the interaction with attitude in effecting performance. He found, too, that the male infant's overall performance, and particularly his mental performance, was more related to the style of mothering than was the female infant's performance.

In the project Dr. Jester and I have just completed (Gordon and Jester, 1972) we utilized a modification of the Reciprocal Category System which has been used for classroom observations in the last half dozen years. We coded the transactional relationships between a parent educator, mother, and infant in teaching situations at six week intervals from three months to twelve months of age. We then correlated these clusters of behaviors, such as parent educator-baby interaction, mother-baby interaction, with children's scores at twelve months of age on the Bayley Mental Development Index. We found, as is the case in classroom behavior, a reliable negative correlation between sustained adult activity and child performance ($r=-.49$) ($N=61$). We also found that rapid interchanges of mother-baby interaction, in which the mother elicits or directs followed by baby responding followed rapidly in turn by further mother action, was positively related to child performance. For example, the single interaction of mother initiates, baby responds, correlated .40 with baby performance ($N=63$). This is an extremely rapid pattern. In a six-second period baby and mother have interacted in an instructional way with each other.

This tends to reinforce the natural observation findings of Escalona, the Harvard Preschool Project, Wachs, Rupp, Keeves, Miller, etc., and to some degree relates to the Streissguth and Bee, and Hess and Shipman work. We must remember that these are reliable differences in our studies within social class and race.

So what do we know about parents as teachers? First, it is evident that what parents do in the early years in their various roles as information givers, managers of the environment, modelers, stage setters, and direct teachers does influence child intellectual performance both during that time and later on in school. We now have good leads on what the specific parental behaviors are which do this. Second, it is clear that we cannot categorize any group of parents; we need to move away from seeing any group as homogeneous. We must examine what an individual family does if we wish to develop responsible programs. We need, then, for programs to move more toward the subject by treatment approach in which we measure parents on what are their real entering behaviors. When we attempt to model, demonstrate or teach those behaviors which have been found to relate to performance, we need to move past just didactic instruction to the larger definition of teaching. Third, we need to recognize that many parents are now doing "the right thing." Fourth, parent education is a reasonable effort and, as in ancient times, the injunction is still true, we need parents who teach diligently unto their children.

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